

You Don't Know Me: New and Selected Stories

James Nolan

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Twists on the noir genre avoid predictability while remaining true to character and sense of place.

You Don't Know Me collects twenty short stories by James Nolan, half of them from his previously published collection, *Perpetual Care*, and half new to book form. All set in New Orleans—a place Nolan clearly knows and utilizes effectively—the stories present a compelling mix of characters and styles, as Nolan crafts plots from the darkly comic to the deeply sad. The result is a strong collection of distinctive short fiction.

One thing that makes this collection enjoyable is how Nolan twists familiar story types in interesting directions. “Open Mike” is a first-person, hard-boiled detective story where an investigation into a girl’s disappearance plays out as an involving mystery with snappy dialogue and a believably cynical result. “Knock Knock” tells a disturbing tale of a young boy abused by an older man, how that affects him growing up, and the tragic ways others misread the situation—but in a way that avoids predictability. Here too, Nolan upends the expected result in a way that makes perfect sense and remains true to his characters.

You Don't Know Me shows a writer in command of his voice and sense of place, using the backdrop of New Orleans to add the right amount of color to the stories. “The Empty Throne” is a genuinely moving story about a gay man’s efforts to gain some approval from a constantly disappointed father by becoming King of Mirth in a Mardi Gras parade, while simultaneously reevaluating his relationship with his live-in boyfriend. “Hard Freeze” tells of a successful pianist coming back to New Orleans to learn more about his family history, meeting his grandmother for the first time, and seeing how family ties still connect much of the city. The story that opens the collection, “Reconcile,” takes place in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. It concerns the close relationship between two neighbors, one of them distraught over her cat running away and then dealing with unwanted attention when the phone number on her missing-pet poster gets broadcast on the national news. Working equally well with first- and third-person narration and with an ear for dialogue, Nolan is able to move easily between a great number of characters who all feel like individuals, and he writes well in service of stories worth telling.

JEFF FLEISCHER (Fall 2014)

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